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Media Relations

UNH Professor's New Book Looks At Women Labor Activists In The Movies

September 28, 2010



DURHAM, N.H. – Some of the most indelible images of women in recent American film have been of working women fighting for labor reform or to expose corporate corruption. In her new book, Jennifer Borda, associate professor of communication at the University of New Hampshire, explores films with female labor activists as main protagonists, illuminating issues of gender and class while depicting the challenges of working class women.

"Women Labor Activists in the Movies: Nine Depictions of Workplace Organizers, 1954-2005" covers films that include *Salt of the Earth*, *Pajama Game*, *Union Maids*, *With Babies and Banners*, *Norma Rae*, *Silkwood*, and *Live Nude Girls Unite*.

The text examines the responses of these films to the labor and feminist movements of the last half century, and how American cinema has portrayed notions of disempowerment, ambivalence and, at times, the resistance of

both women and the working class at large.

"What surprised me most about these films was the way that the Hollywood films portrayed female labor activists as outsiders who must do battle not only against the workplace, but against their workers and community as well. Consequently, these troubled women are also reliant on the guidance and authority of a well-respected male figure in order to accomplish their activist goals," Borda says. "So, although these films featured strong female heroines and most were based on true stories, the Hollywood films, whether in the 1970s or 2004, maintained traditional gender hierarchies and stereotypes."

According to Borda, the main difference between the Hollywood version of these stories and the reality is that labor activism, or any kind of social protest, is never an individual effort but always the work of a collective.



"The independent films that I looked at all showed this brilliantly and provide a clear message that is the work of many that will raise workers to the respectable standards they deserve in the face of corporate corruption and greed. However, the mainstream films each focused on the achievement of one lone individual, which is typical of the classical Hollywood style," Borda says.

"As a result, in this anti-union era, the activists in these films seem to be an anomaly or a rogue person who stands up for what they believe in rather than part of a larger, collective movement of workers, which is what is necessary for real change to occur," she says.

Book cover of "Women Labor Activists in the Movies: Nine Depictions of Workplace Organizers, 1954-2005"

Jennifer Borda is an associate professor of communication at the University of New Hampshire. Her work has appeared in a number of academic journals and scholarly anthologies, including *Text & Performance Quarterly*, *Women's Studies in Communication*, *Feminist Studies* and *Communication Quarterly*.

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Jennifer Borda, associate professor of communication at the University of New Hampshire
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Book cover of "Women Labor Activists in the Movies: Nine Depictions of Workplace Organizers, 1954-2005"

http://www.unh.edu/news/img/borda_bookcover.jpg

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